

**Views**

**Remediation at a Crossroads**

April 21, 2011

By [Mike Rose](mailto:newsroom@insidehighered.com)

The young woman in the hoodie behind me whispers “cried” to her friend, whose head is resting on her folded arms. “Wrote,” head-resting woman whispers to herself as the teacher goes down a list of sentences on an overhead screen. “Repeated,” “ate,” “swam,” they and the two other students in their row answer softly, in between light chatter.

I am visiting the most basic class of a community college remedial English sequence, and the teacher is reviewing verb tense by having her students convert a list of verbs from present tense to past. No one seems to be having any trouble with the exercise. The quartet behind me does it under-breath while catching up on their day-to-day. They might make errors in tense in their writing, but they won’t be writing anything longer than a paragraph until they take the next course in the remedial sequence. Unfortunately, a number of students in such classes won’t make it through the series to get to fuller writing assignments of the kind they have to do in their other classes.

This little episode reveals some of the problems with college remediation as it is typically executed. It is built on a set of assumptions about language and cognition that have long ago been proven inadequate, like the belief that focusing on isolated grammar exercises will help students write better prose. The work students are doing isn’t connected to the writing they are required to do in their other courses, academic or vocational.

Going beyond the standard remedial playbook -- if the instructor were so inclined -- would be a big challenge, not only because she lacks training, but also because she has no time; like so many of her peers, she is teaching at two other colleges to try to make a living. The sequence of three, even four, lockstep non-credit courses established to help students build proficiency is based on the same flawed notion of language growth that limits the curriculum of the courses in the sequence. The textbook market, college requirements, and departmental structures all further reinforce the standard remedial model.

For quite a while some teachers of basic or remedial writing have been working against the grain, creating challenging curriculums that directly foster the kinds of writing skills and habits of mind needed for success in college. Or developing programs that link a writing course to a content course to provide a meaningful context for writing. Or placing those students who test low into credit-bearing freshman composition and providing additional support.

But now we are at a watershed moment when not only are individuals and programs trying to do something fresh with remediation, but national attention -- public and philanthropic -- is focused on the issue as well.

The big question is whether we will truly seize this moment and create for underprepared students a rich education in literacy and numeracy, or make some partial changes -- more online instruction, shortened course sequences -- but leave the remedial model intact. To make significant changes, we’ll need to understand all the interlocking pieces of the remediation puzzle, something we’re not oriented to do, for our disciplinary and methodological training and public policy toolkit work against a comprehensive view of the problem.

Most higher education policy research on remediation does not include historical analysis of the beliefs about cognition and instruction that inform curriculums. In fact, there’s not a lot of close analysis of what goes on in classrooms, the cognitive give and take of instruction and what students make of it. And I’m not aware of any policy research crafted with the aid of people who actually teach those classes. Finally, we don’t get much of a sense of the texture of students’ lives, the terrible economic instability of some of them, but even less of a sense of the power of learning new things and, through that learning, redefining who you are. Profiles of students in remedial classes, when we do get them, are too often profiles of failure rather than of people with dynamic mental lives.

Most of us are trained and live our professional lives in disciplinary silos. Let me give you one example of how mind-boggling, and I think harmful, this intellectual isolation can become. In all the articles I’ve read on remediation in higher education journals, not one cites the 40 years’ worth of work on basic writing produced by teachers and researchers of writing. There is even a *Journal of Basic Writing* that emerged out of the experiments with open admission at CUNY in the 1970s. Not a mention of any of it. Zip.

In addition to disciplinary silos, there are methodological silos. You won’t find a randomized control trial in the 130-plus issues of the *Journal of Basic Writing,* and that for some is sufficient reason for many people to ignore them. But if we hope to really do something transformational with remediation, we’ll need all the wisdom we can garner, from multiple disciplines and multiple methodologies, from multiple lines of sight.

Along with a wider scope of inquiry we will need a bountiful philosophy of education -- and the leadership to enact it. At the same time that there is a push to get more low-income people into postsecondary education, cash-strapped states are cutting education budgets, leading colleges to limit enrollments and cut classes and student services.

In my state of California (and I’m sure in other states as well) some policy makers are wondering -- not fully in public -- if we can no longer afford to educate everybody, if we should ration our resources, directing them toward those who are already better prepared for college. We have here the makings in education of a distinction the historian Michael Katz notes in the discourse on poverty, a distinction between those deserving and undeserving of assistance. In the midst of a powerful anti-government, anti-welfare-state climate, will there be the political courage to stand against the rationing of educational opportunity?

The democratic philosophy I envision helps us to see in basic skills instruction the rich possibility for developing literacy and numeracy and for realizing the promise of a second-chance society. Such a philosophy affirms the ability of the common person and guides instruction that goes beyond the acquisition of fundamental skills and routine toward an understanding of their meaning and application, the principles underlying them, and the broader habits of mind that incorporate them. In such instruction, error becomes an intellectual entry point.

If a young adult is having trouble with fractions, for example, how did his misunderstandings and flawed procedures develop? What formal or informal mathematical knowledge does he have that can be tapped? How does one access that cognitive history and lead the student to analyze and remedy it?

The de facto philosophy of education we do have is a strictly economic one. This is dangerous, for without a civic and moral core it could easily lead to a snazzy 21st-century version of an old and shameful pattern in American education: working-class people get a functional, skills-and-drills education geared toward lower-level work. To be sure, the people who are the focus of current college initiatives are going to school to improve their economic prospects. As one woman put it so well: “It’s a terrible thing to not have any money.”

But people also go to college to feel their minds working, to remedy a poor education, to redefine who they are. You won’t hear any of this in the national talk about postsecondary access and success. For all the hope and opportunity they represent, our initiatives lack the kind of creativity and heartbeat that transform institutions and foster the unrealized ability of a full sweep of our citizenry.

*Mike Rose is on the faculty of the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and is the author of* Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us. *This article is drawn from a Presidential Invited Address at the 2011 meeting of the American Educational Research Association*.

**© Copyright 2011 Inside Higher Ed**